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ABSTRACT

This report presents results of a national survey of college and university governing board assessment policies and practices, and describes a "typical" board assessment process constructed from the most frequent survey responses. The survey included 1,348 presidents and 571 board chairs. The typical assessment includes the following: the board has charged the chair with responsibility for board self-assessment; although an assessment was probably conducted in the last five years, the board has no policy requiring periodic assessments; the most recent review was conducted at a retreat and did not engage the services of an outside facilitator; trustees completed written surveys or were interviewed as part of the assessment; the board retreat had a positive effect on reviving trustee commitment, clarifying trustee roles and responsibilities, and establishing board priorities; and the chair usually reported the board's performance as "very satisfactory." The survey questions addressed policies, guidelines, and practices; the role of the president; the president and the board; outcomes reported by presidents and board chairs; and assistance for future reviews. Each of the survey questions is analyzed with a table showing answers for both public and private institutions. Also provided is information on the survey methodology, including data collection and the survey population. (Contains 38 references.) (DB)

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Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges

A National Survey of Board Performance Assessment Policies and Practices

BY MERRILL PELLOWS SCHWARTZ

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Introduction

Boards of trustees serve an essential role in governing colleges and universities, yet evaluating the performance of governing boards is not commonplace—certainly not as widespread as presidential assessment. Many explanations have been offered, such as the time and expense involved, but two others stand out: Trustees are volunteers, not employees, and meaningful performance standards are elusive.

Assessing the performance of trustees, whether individually or as a group, seems to make boards uncomfortable. Yet because trustees are such valuable assets, shouldn't boards spend time looking at their own performance in an effort to improve it? Trustees, though volunteers, want their time and talents to be used well; they do not want them wasted. If the goal of board assessment is improvement, not summary judgment, boards will find great value in examining their performance, without concern for ideal or absolute standards.

"The paramount goals of board evaluations are not precise comparisons, individual appraisals, and scientific accuracy," write Richard P. Chait, Thomas P. Holland, and Barbara E. Taylor in *Improving the Performance of Governing Boards*. "Rather, assessment offers a practical means—an 'excuse' or catalyst—to initiate and sustain attention to board performance, to stimulate self-reflection, and to track changes over time." Assessment can be the means for boards to enhance their own performance through reflection—a self-conscious step in the learning process, not an end in itself. It can help good boards to be better boards.

Calling this activity "board self-assessment" acknowledges that, for most governing boards, it is both an optional undertaking and an activity limited to board members. While the president serves at the pleasure of the board and his or her performance typically is evaluated by the board, it is up to the board itself to determine whether and how to examine its own performance.

In practice, board self-assessment takes a variety of forms and may even involve outside experts. There is no one way to do it. As the data reported here reveal, boards use a variety of approaches.

In 1997, Merrill Schwartz surveyed presidents and board chairs of American colleges and universities regarding board and presidential assessment policies and practices. A large population of presidents (2,112) and board chairs (1,627) was included in the study, and the response rate was high, 64 percent (1,348) for presidents and 33 percent (535) for board chairs (of institutions not in systems). This report includes responses from 36 chairs of multicampus system boards in addition to the 535 campus-based board chairs, for a total of 571. The responses of board chairs of single and multicampus institutions are reported together and address policies, guidelines, and practices for assessing board performance; the president and the board; board leadership; the performance of individual board members; and the outcomes of board self-assessment activities. Data about actual practices for board assessment are based on

the responses of board chairs whose boards conducted a performance assessment within the past five years.

AGB has published the data on board assessment and presidential assessment as separate occasional papers yet they are, of course, related activities. (Occasional Paper No. 34, "A National Survey of Presidential Performance Assessment Policies and Practices," is available from AGB.) The board's performance is tied to that of the president and vice versa. Readers are encouraged to think of board and presidential assessment as part of an overall examination of governance and to find ways to integrate them in practice. Though the data suggest presidential assessment usually is undertaken discretely, much more could be gained by assessing board performance in conjunction with presidential performance.

How to Use This Survey

Governing board leaders looking to compare how other boards assess their own performance—or who are considering assessing their own board's performance in conjunction with that of their chief executive's—can use the data from this survey to improve assessment policies and practices. In addition, the survey results also add to our understanding of how board chairs perceive the value and outcomes of this important but delicate process. The survey provides answers to such questions as these:

- Who typically is responsible for initiating board assessment activities?
- Do most institutions have written policies requiring board performance assessments?
- How often are such assessments typically conducted?
- Do boards ordinarily use an outside facilitator to help conduct the assessment?
- What key issues does the process usually focus on, and how is information gathered?
- Are indicators of institutional performance generally used to evaluate the board's performance?
- How usual is it for the performance of the board and president to be assessed simultaneously?
- Do boards typically assess the performance of the board chair or individual trustees?
- What are the criteria for individual trustee assessment?
- What was the impact of the last board assessment?

The "Typical" Board Performance Assessment Process

Boards engage in a variety of activities to evaluate and improve their own performance. Those activities the board undertakes to look at its own performance, in a special retreat or as part of other board work, are called board self-assessment. This summary of the most common responses of board chairs to survey questions regarding board self-assessment policies and practices constitutes a profile of the "typical" board self-assessment.

The typical board has charged the board chair with responsibility for board self-assessment and is likely to have conducted one in the last five years. However, the board has no tradition, policy, or schedule *requiring* the board to periodically assess its own performance.

The board's most recent review was conducted as a retreat and did not engage the services of an outside facilitator. Trustees participated in a written survey or in interviews as part of the assessment. The retreat focused on strategic planning, institutional mission and education policy, and how the board functions as a group. The board did not use previously agreed-upon goals or indicators of institutional performance as criteria for evaluating its performance.

Though the assessment of the president's performance takes place independently, the board's self-assessment covered several aspects of board-presidential relations, including board information needs, board support for the president, policy-making and management responsibilities, and board orientation and education.

During the past year, board members were asked to provide feedback on how board meetings can be improved, but a separate assessment of the performance of board leaders did not take place, nor did the board have a process for assessing the performance of individual trustees.

The board retreat had a positive effect in several areas. Improvement was notable in regard to reviving trustee commitment, clarifying trustees' roles and responsibilities, and establishing board priorities. The board chair judged the board to be satisfied with its assessment process.

The board chair reported that the board's performance was very satisfactory. The most significant improvements as a result of the board retreat included more focused, productive, and well-attended meetings; strengthened board organization; increased trustee commitment; a clearer understanding of trustees' roles; enhanced board membership; better communication within the board and with constituents; and a renewed commitment to fund-raising.

The board chair found that most aspects of the self-assessment were positive and that no "least useful part" comes to mind. However, the assessment process itself could be improved, in his or her judgment, as could trustee participation and follow-through.

The board chair thought the greatest barriers to board self-assessment were a lack of clear benchmarks for "good" board performance and a lack of good models for the assessment process. Lack of time, expense, or interest were not significant barriers. To assist with future board assessments, the chair was interested in sample board evaluation forms, literature on board assessment, and model board-evaluation policies.

POLICIES, GUIDELINES, AND PRACTICES

- *Most often, the board chair was responsible for initiating board assessment activities.*

TABLE 1
WHO IS PRIMARILY RESPONSIBLE FOR INITIATING BOARD SELF-ASSESSMENT ACTIVITIES?

	Total %	Public %	Private %
Board Chair	44.1	52.3	39.8
No one	23.5	27.6	21.2
Standing Committees	12.1	1.0	18.0
Executive Committee	7.0	2.5	9.4
Pres. of Institution	4.9	5.0	4.8
Other	0.9	1.0	0.8
Don't Know/NA	7.6	10.5	6.0
Total	**100.1**	**99.9**	**100**

- *For most, there was no tradition or policy requiring periodic board assessment.*

TABLE 2
ON WHAT BASIS ARE BOARD SELF-ASSESSMENT ACTIVITIES INITIATED?

	Total %	Public %	Private %
No policy or tradition of board self-assessment	56.9	57.8	56.5
By tradition, the board evaluates its own performance periodically	26.8	23.1	28.8
Board policy requires periodic board self-assessment	6.5	8.0	5.6
Other	2.5	3.0	2.0
Don't Know/NA	7.4	8.0	7.0
Total	**100.1**	**99.9**	**99.9**

- *Most boards do not have an established schedule for self-assessment.*

TABLE 3
EITHER BY WRITTEN BOARD POLICY OR TRADITION, ABOUT HOW OFTEN ARE BOARD ASSESSMENTS SUPPOSED TO BE CONDUCTED?

	Total %	Public %	Private %
No requirement or tradition of board self-assessment	43.3	44.7	42.5
Once a year	18.2	25.1	14.5
Every two or three years	12.1	6.5	15.1
Every four or five years	3.0	1.5	3.8
Less often than every five years	1.1	1.0	1.1
Periodically, not a set time	13.0	11.1	14.0
Other	1.1	2.0	0.5
Don't know/no answer	8.4	8.0	8.7
Total	**100.2**	**99.9**	**100.2**

- *Only about half the boards conducted a self-assessment during the past five years.*

TABLE 4
HAS THE GOVERNING BOARD CONDUCTED A BOARD SELF-ASSESSMENT WITHIN THE PAST FIVE YEARS?

	Total %	Public %	Private %
No	48.2	55.3	44.4
Yes	46.6	42.2	48.9
Don't Know/NA	5.3	2.5	6.8
Total	**100.1**	**100**	**100.1**

- *Boards typically conducted their self-assessment without an outside facilitator.*

TABLE 5
DID THE BOARD USE A FACILITATOR FROM OUTSIDE OF THE INSTITUTION TO CONDUCT THE LAST ASSESSMENT?

	Total %	Public %	Private %
No	66.2	77.4	61.0
Yes	32.3	20.2	37.9
Don't Know/NA	1.5	2.4	1.1
Total	**100**	**100**	**100**

- *Trustees typically completed interviews or written surveys as part of the last review.*

TABLE 6
DID TRUSTEES PARTICIPATE IN EITHER INTERVIEWS OR A WRITTEN SURVEY AS PART OF THE LAST ASSESSMENT?

	Total %	Public %	Private %
No	24.4	39.3	17.6
Yes	73.3	56.0	81.3
Don't Know/NA	2.3	4.8	1.1
Total	**100**	**100.1**	**100**

- *Boards typically used a retreat as the setting for board assessment.*

TABLE 7
WHAT WAS THE SETTING FOR THE LAST DISCUSSION OF THE BOARD'S PERFORMANCE?

	Total %	Public %	Private %
A board retreat	51.9	77.4	40.1
A board meeting	31.2	15.5	38.5
A meeting of board leaders or committee	9.4	2.4	12.6
Other	5.3	2.4	6.6
Don't Know/NA	2.3	2.4	2.1
Total	**100.1**	**100.1**	**99.9**

- *The top three issues board assessments focused on were: institutional and strategic planning; institutional mission and education policy; and group process/how the board functions as a group.*

TABLE 8
WHAT ISSUES OR TOPICS RECEIVED THE MOST ATTENTION IN THE BOARD'S MOST RECENT SELF-ASSESSMENT? (CHECK ALL THAT APPLY)

	Total %	Public %	Private %
Institutional and strategic planning	68.0	66.7	68.7
Institutional mission and education policy	57.9	58.3	57.7
Group process/how board functions	52.6	63.1	47.8
Board goals	43.6	57.1	37.4
Financial support and/or fund raising	41.7	22.6	50.5
Board orientation and education	38.0	36.9	38.5
Board organization or committee structure	37.6	29.8	41.2
Board information needs	37.6	35.7	38.5
Financial management	34.6	27.4	37.9
Board membership or composition	31.6	8.3	42.3
Board/chief executive relations	29.7	48.8	20.9
Performance of individual board members	27.8	22.6	30.2
Physical plant	18.0	15.5	19.2
Board/faculty relations	16.5	17.9	15.9
Board bylaws	14.7	11.9	15.9
Board/student relations	9.4	11.9	8.2
Other	3.4	3.6	3.3
n/a	3.8	4.8	3.3

- *Previously agreed upon goals were not typically used as criteria for evaluating board performance.*

TABLE 9
WERE PREVIOUSLY AGREED UPON GOALS FOR THE BOARD'S PERFORMANCE USED AS CRITERIA FOR EVALUATING THE BOARD?

	Total %	Public %	Private %
No	65.0	52.4	70.9
Yes	32.0	45.2	25.8
NA	3.0	2.4	3.3
Total	**100**	**100**	**100**

- *Most boards didn't use institutional performance indicators to evaluate board performance.*

TABLE 10
WERE ANY INDICATORS OF INSTITUTIONAL PERFORMANCE USED AS CRITERIA FOR EVALUATING BOARD PERFORMANCE?

	Total %	Public %	Private %
No	62.4	63.1	62.1
Yes	30.1	32.1	29.1
n/a	7.5	4.8	8.8
Total	**100**	**100**	**100**

THE PRESIDENT AND THE BOARD

- *Most boards assess the performance of the president at a different time, however, many aspects of board-presidential relations were included in the board's review.*

TABLE 11

IN WHAT WAYS, IF ANY, WAS THE LAST BOARD SELF-ASSESSMENT RELATED TO ASSESSMENT OF THE PRESIDENT'S PERFORMANCE?

	Total %	Public %	Private %
President assessed at another time	70.7	64.3	73.6
No process for presidential assessment	7.1	2.4	9.3
Presidential and board assessment are done together	12.8	20.2	9.3
Other	5.6	7.1	4.9
n/a	5.3	7.1	4.4
Total	**101.5**	**101.1**	**101.5**

Note: Totals exceed 100% due to multiple responses.

TABLE 12

WHAT ASPECTS OF BOARD AND PRESIDENTIAL RELATIONS WERE INCLUDED IN THE BOARD ASSESSMENT? (CHECK ALL THAT APPLY)

	Total %	Public %	Private %
Board information needs	62.0	67.9	59.3
Board support for the president	59.0	65.5	56.0
Policy making and management	57.9	66.7	53.8
Board orientation and education	52.3	51.2	52.7
Fund-raising	43.6	26.2	51.6
Trustee selection	33.5	9.5	44.5
Presidential succession planning	10.9	4.8	13.7
Other	4.9	7.1	3.8
None of the above	4.9	3.6	5.5
n/a	9.0	7.1	9.9

BOARD LEADERSHIP AND INDIVIDUAL TRUSTEES

- *Most boards do not specifically assess the performance of board leaders.*

TABLE 13
DOES THE BOARD, OR A BOARD COMMITTEE, ASSESS THE PERFORMANCE OF BOARD LEADERS?

	Total %	Public %	Private %
No	72.3	85.4	65.3
Yes	24.2	11.6	30.9
n/a	3.5	3.0	3.8
Total	**100**	**100**	**100**

- *During the past year, trustees typically were asked to provide feedback to improve board meetings.*

TABLE 14
WITHIN THE PAST YEAR, WERE BOARD MEMBERS ASKED TO PROVIDE FEEDBACK ON HOW BOARD MEETINGS CAN BE IMPROVED?

	Total %	Public %	Private %
No	39.2	42.7	37.4
Yes	57.4	55.3	58.6
NA	3.3	2.0	4.0
Total	**99.9**	**100**	**100**

- *Less than one-third of the boards had a process for assessing the performance of individual trustees.*

TABLE 15
DOES THE BOARD HAVE A PROCESS FOR ASSESSING THE PERFORMANCE OF INDIVIDUAL MEMBERS?

	Total %	Public %	Private %
No	69.7	91.5	58.1
Yes	27.3	6.0	38.7
NA	3.0	2.5	3.2
Total	**100**	**100**	**100**

- *Most boards which assessed individual trustee performance did so at the end of terms or as part of the board's overall assessment; for criteria, they relied on attendance, committee work, and financial assistance.*

TABLE 16
WHEN IS INDIVIDUAL TRUSTEE PERFORMANCE ASSESSED: (CHECK ALL THAT APPLY)

	Total %	Public %	Private %
At the end of terms or when considered for reappointment	71.8	25.0	75.7
When prompted by a need or problem	19.2	33.3	18.1
Annually	19.2	33.3	18.1
As part of overall board self-assessment	15.4	41.7	13.2
Other	2.6	8.3	2.1
n/a	1.3	8.3	0.7

TABLE 17
WHAT ARE THE CRITERIA FOR INDIVIDUAL TRUSTEE ASSESSMENT? (CHECK ALL THAT APPLY)

	Total %	Public %	Private %
Attendance	91.7	75.0	93.1
Committee work	80.1	50.0	82.6
Personal financial support	68.6	8.3	73.6
Fund raising assistance	56.4	–	61.1
Varies according to individual	48.7	41.7	49.3
Public relations efforts	33.3	16.7	34.7
Other	10.3	33.3	8.3
Don't know/NA	3.3	25.0	1.4

OUTCOMES

- *Board self-assessment activities generally had a positive impact, especially in regard to increasing trustee commitment and clarifying trustee responsibilities.*

TABLE 18
WHAT WAS THE IMPACT OF THE LAST BOARD SELF-ASSESSMENT?

	Better	Worse	Same	n/a
Trustee commitment	62.0*	0.8	30.1	7.2
Clarity of trustees' roles and responsibilities	56.8	1.5	34.2	7.5
Clarity of board priorities	53.4	1.5	34.6	10.5
Board/president relations	47.4	1.1	42.1	9.4
Content of board agendas	47.0	0.8	40.2	12.0
Use of board's time	46.6	1.5	36.5	15.4
Trustee orientation or education	45.5	1.9	39.1	13.5
How board meetings are conducted	43.2	1.1	43.2	12.4
Board structure	33.1*	0.4	50.0	16.5
Board composition	28.6*	0.4	50.0	21.0

**There were differences by sector. Responses of "better" by private sector boards were more than fifteen percentage points higher than those of public sector boards.*

- *Most boards were satisfied with the process used for their last self-assessment.*

TABLE 19
HOW SATISFIED DO YOU THINK THE BOARD WAS WITH THE PROCESS FOR THE LAST BOARD ASSESSMENT?

	Total %	Public %	Private %
Very Satisfied	15.8	14.3	16.5
Satisfied	58.3	59.5	57.7
Unsatisfied	4.1	2.4	4.9
Very unsatisfied	11.3	11.9	11.0
Don't know/NA	10.5	11.9	9.9
Total	**100**	**100**	**100**

- *There was no single solution that chairs agreed would improve board assessments.*

TABLE 20
IN YOUR OPINION, WHAT WOULD IMPROVE THE BOARD'S SELF-ASSESSMENT PROCESS? (CHECK ALL THAT APPLY)

	Total %	Public %	Private %
Greater commitment from board, higher participation rate	31.2	35.7	29.1
New board policy on board assessment	24.8	15.5	29.1
Better facilitation/an experienced consultant	21.1	25.0	19.2
Written materials, such as self-study criteria	31.6	32.1	31.3
Other	5.6	4.8	6.0
Don't know/NA	24.8	23.8	25.2

- *The greatest barriers to board assessment were a lack of clear benchmarks for "good performance" or good models for the process, not time or money.*

TABLE 21
WHAT ARE THE GREATEST BARRIERS TO BOARD SELF-ASSESSMENT? (CHECK ALL THAT APPLY)

	Total %	Public %	Private %
Lack of clear benchmarks for good board performance	48.2	47.7	48.4
Lack of good models for an assessment process	40.6	41.7	40.1
Lack of interest among trustees	30.5	33.2	29.0
Lack of time	27.0	21.6	29.8
Lack of interest by president	7.4	8.0	7.0
Expense	3.9	3.0	4.3
Other	7.7	12.6	5.1
n/a	9.8	8.5	10.5

- *Overall, most chairs rated the performance of their own board as very satisfactory.*

TABLE 22
OVERALL, HOW WOULD YOU RATE YOUR BOARD'S PERFORMANCE?

	Total %	Public %	Private %
Outstanding	14.5	22.6	10.2
Very Satisfactory	50.8	46.2	53.2
Satisfactory	29.2	26.6	30.6
Unsatisfactory	0.9	1.0	0.8
Very Unsatisfactory	0.5	0.5	0.5
Don't Know/NA	4.1	3.0	4.6
Total	**100**	**99.9**	**99.9**

ASSISTANCE FOR FUTURE REVIEWS

- *Sample forms, sample policies, and relevant literature would be of interest to board chairs to assist with future board reviews.*

TABLE 23
WHAT ASSISTANCE, IF ANY, IS OF INTEREST TO YOU? (CHECK ALL THAT APPLY)

	Total %	Public %	Private %
Literature on board assessment	62.9	57.8	65.6
Sample trustee position descriptions	34.5	30.7	37.1
Sample board evaluation forms	72.7	68.8	74.7
Sample board evaluation policies	58.8	55.3	60.8
Workshop or training for presidents	5.8	4.0	6.7
Workshop or training for chairs & trustees	25.6	29.1	23.7
Names of consultants	6.3	4.5	7.3
Board assessment consultation services	8.8	6.5	9.9
Informal counsel by telephone	7.4	6.5	7.8
Summary data from this survey	45.4	44.2	46.0
n/a	9.5	9.5	9.4

Survey Methodology

Merrill Schwartz conducted a survey of chairs of governing boards of American colleges and universities to learn about the processes used for evaluating board performance. The questions examined policies, guidelines, and practices for assessing board performance; board and presidential assessment; board leadership; the performance of individual board members; and comments and suggestions. The survey was part of a larger study that also included as respondents college and university presidents and concerned both board and presidential assessment.

DATA COLLECTION

Three survey instruments were developed: one for presidents, one for board chairs of single-campus institutions, and one for chairs of multicampus system boards. The presidents' survey concerned only presidential assessment, while the board chairs' surveys included questions on presidential assessment as well as board self-assessment. Subjects included all accredited postsecondary institutions in the United States that were active, former, or prospective members of AGB. Self-administered questionnaires were mailed in January 1997 to the presidents and board chairs of these institutions. One follow-up mailing to nonrespondents was done immediately after the initial deadline passed.

SURVEY POPULATION

For the purposes of this study, "board chair" means the head of the institution's governing board, regardless of the title given to the body or the person who heads it.

The survey of board chairs of single-campus institutions included a population of 1,627 and had 535 respondents, a response rate of 32.9 percent. The survey population included chairs of governing boards of institutions headed by a single president that were current, former, or prospective members of AGB. The survey of board chairs of multicampus systems had 36 respondents, a response rate of 21.8 percent from a population of 165. The survey population included chairs of governing boards of institutions with more than one president that were current, former, or prospective members of AGB. The survey instruments for chairs of boards of single-campus institutions and chairs of multicampus system boards included the same questions regarding board self-assessment, allowing the results to be reported together.

Total respondents included 199 board chairs from public sector institutions (34.9 percent) and 372 board chairs from private sector institutions (65.1 percent). Compared with the universe of presidents (Ross, Green, & Henderson, 1993), respondent board chairs over represented private liberal arts colleges and under represented public two-year colleges, but in other categories were fairly comparable. The distribution by sector and Carnegie classification was quite similar for respondent board chairs and respondent presidents. See Table A for details.

TABLE A
RESPONDENT BOARD CHAIRS BY CARNEGIE CLASSIFICATION AND SECTOR

Carnegie Classification	Total		Public		Private	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
RU1&2	18	3.2	11	5.5	7	1.9
DOC1&2	13	2.3	8	4.0	5	1.3
CU1&2	116	20.3	33	16.6	83	22.3
LA1&2	174	30.5	3	1.5	171	46.0
Two-Year	147	25.7	123	61.8	24	6.5
Specialized	83	14.5	3	1.5	80	21.5
System	20	3.5	18	9.0	2	0.5
Total	**571**	**100**	**199**	**99.9**	**372**	**100**

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